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1                    **A new diatom-based multimetric index to assess lake ecological status**

2    Tison-Rosebery, J. <sup>1,2\*</sup>, Boutry, S. <sup>1,2</sup>, Bertrin, V. <sup>1,2</sup>, Leboucher, T. <sup>3</sup>, Morin, S. <sup>1,2</sup>

3    <sup>(1)</sup> INRAE, UR EABX, F-33612 Cestas, France

4    <sup>(2)</sup> Pôle R&D ECLA, France

5    <sup>(3)</sup> Université de Lorraine, CNRS, LIEC, Metz, France

6    \*Corresponding author: [juliette.rosebery@inrae.fr](mailto:juliette.rosebery@inrae.fr)

7    **Abstract**

8    Eutrophication impairs lake ecosystems at a global scale. In this context, as benthic  
9    microalgae are well-established warnings for a large range of stressors, particularly nutrient  
10    enrichment, the Water Framework Directive required the development of diatom-based  
11    methods to monitor lake eutrophication.

12    Here, we present the diatom-based index we developed for French lakes, named IBDL. Data  
13    were collected in 93 lakes from 2015 to 2020. A challenge arose from the discontinuous  
14    pressure gradient of our dataset, especially the low number of nutrient-impacted lakes. To  
15    analyze the data we opted for the so-called “Threshold Indicator Taxa ANalysis” method,  
16    which makes it possible to determine a list of “alert taxa”. We obtained a multimetric index  
17    based on different pressure gradients (Kjeldahl nitrogen, suspended matter, biological oxygen  
18    demand and total phosphorous).

19    The IBDL proved to be particularly relevant as it has a twofold interest: an excellent  
20    relationship with total phosphorus and possible application to any lake metatype. Its  
21    complementarity with macrophyte-based indices moreover justifies the use of at least two  
22    primary producer components for lake ecological status classification.

23    **Keywords:** ecological assessment, lakes, phytobenthos, Water Framework Directive

## 24 **1-Introduction**

25 Eutrophication is one of the most frequent consequences of human pressure on lake  
26 ecosystems at a global scale (Stenger-Kovacs et al., 2007). Primary producers are directly  
27 impacted since they are the base of the aquatic food web (Brauer et al., 2012). As the ability  
28 of species to compete differs according to nutrient availability, nutrient enrichment results in  
29 significant changes in community structure and function (Birk, 2012). For this reason,  
30 scientists and policymakers developed indices based on primary producer attributes to  
31 monitor eutrophication (Stevenson, 2014). In the early 2000s, the Water Framework Directive  
32 (WFD, 2000/06/EC) required all EU member states to implement bioassessment methods  
33 based, among other aspects, on the biological quality of “macrophytes and phytobenthos” to  
34 assess lake ecological status. This led to the development of numerous methods at the  
35 European level.

36 Poikane et al. (2016) reviewed this panel of methods and observed that countries generally  
37 developed separate assessment tools for macrophytes and phytobenthos, and that most of  
38 them considered diatoms, which are unicellular microalgae, to be a good proxy for  
39 phytobenthos. Diatoms are indeed early and well-established warnings for a large range of  
40 stressors, particularly nutrient enrichment (Stevenson, 2014). As a first step, indices originally  
41 dedicated to rivers were applied to lakes by the majority of member states (Kelly et al.,  
42 2014b), considering that many processes influencing diatom assemblages were comparable  
43 between lakeshores and shallow rivers (Cantonati and Lowe, 2014).

44 In some rare cases, diatom-based indices were developed specifically for lakes, based on  
45 species composition and abundance as for rivers (Bennion et al., 2014; Poikane et al., 2016).  
46 Diatoms from mud and silts were generally not considered, as they would respond to pore-  
47 water chemistry rather than water quality. The recommended sampling substrate varied

48 according to authors, from macrophytes to cobbles or even artificial substrates when no  
49 natural substrates are found in all water bodies (King et al., 2006).

50 To harmonize the different national approaches, a European intercalibration exercise was  
51 performed, involving eleven member states (Kelly et al., 2014b). France participated in this  
52 exercise with the Biological Diatom Index (BDI, Coste et al., 2009), routinely used to assess  
53 river ecological status. Although previous results tended to suggest there was a good  
54 correlation between BDI and the environmental pressure gradients, at least in shallow lakes  
55 (Cellamare et al., 2012), this intercalibration exercise revealed a poor correlation between  
56 BDI values and total phosphorous across France (Kelly et al., 2014b). This was explained by  
57 the absence of many lake taxa from the list of key species used to calculate the BDI, resulting  
58 in an overall poor relevance of the final status assessment.

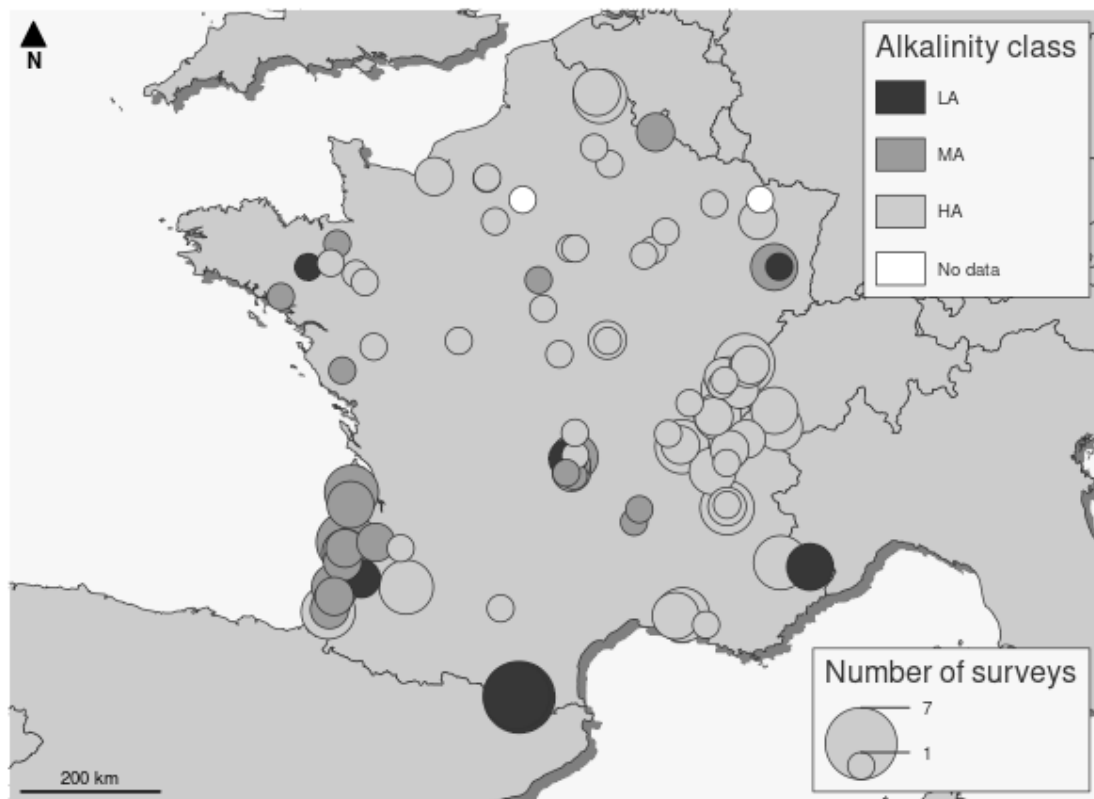
59 The aim of the present study was, therefore, to develop a new diatom-based index for lakes in  
60 metropolitan France: the IBDL (*Indice Biologique Diatomées en Lac*: Diatom Biological  
61 Index for Lakes). To collect the necessary data, we proposed a method (Morin et al., 2010)  
62 consistent with a potential subsequent combination of this index with the existing French  
63 macrophyte index IBML (*Indice Biologique Macrophytique en Lac*: Macrophyte Biological  
64 Index for Lakes, Boutry et al., 2015). We detail here how diatom data were sampled and  
65 analyzed and how we developed the IBDL. Finally, we discuss the relevance of this new  
66 index, comparing the results obtained with index scores based on macrophytes, and assessing  
67 its ability to reveal environmental gradients.

## 68 **2-Materials and Methods**

### 69 **2-1 Data collection**

70 Samples were collected from 93 French lakes (Figure 1) during the summer period, each year  
71 from 2015 to 2020, according to Morin et al. (2010). The lakes were classified into three

72 metatypes based on alkalinity, according to the European intercalibration exercise previously  
73 performed (Kelly et al., 2014b): low alkalinity (LA, alkalinity  $\leq 0.2 \text{ meq.l}^{-1}$ ), medium  
74 alkalinity (MA,  $0.2 \text{ meq.l}^{-1} < \text{alkalinity} < 1 \text{ meq.l}^{-1}$ ), and high alkalinity (HA, alkalinity  $\geq 1$   
75  $\text{meq.l}^{-1}$ ). Diatoms were collected from both mineral substrates and lakeshore macrophyte  
76 surfaces in observation units (OUs), whose number and location varied according to the lake  
77 surface area and the riparian zone types. Such units are defined in the French macrophyte  
78 sampling protocol for lakes NF T90-328 (AFNOR, 2022).



79

80 Figure 1: Study sites, number of surveys per site, and lake alkalinity classes (LA: low  
81 alkalinity; MA: medium alkalinity; HA: high alkalinity) (Kelly et al., 2014a)

82

83 2-1-1 Biological data

84 Samples from hard mineral substrates were taken from at least five boulders or cobbles  
85 selected at random for each OU. The total surface area sampled was equivalent to 100 cm<sup>2</sup>, as  
86 defined in the NF T90-354 standard (AFNOR, 2016). Selected substrates had to be submerged  
87 within the euphotic zone, at a maximum depth of 0.5 m.

88 Samples performed on macrophytes were taken from helophytes (mainly *Phragmites australis*  
89 (Cav.) Trin. ex Steud.). Green stem segments submerged for at least 4 to 6 weeks were  
90 collected from a minimum of 5 macrophytes chosen at random. These stem segments had to  
91 be located at a maximum depth of 0.2 m.

92 Diatoms were sampled from both substrates according to the NF T90-354 protocol, in line  
93 with the European standards (EN 13946, European Commission). Cells were identified at  
94 100x magnification by examining permanent slides of cleaned diatom frustules (400 valves  
95 per slide) using, among others, Krammer and Lange-Bertalot (1986–1991) and Lange-  
96 Bertalot (1995–2015, 2000–2013). Taxonomic homogenization was performed with Omnidia  
97 6 software (Lecointe et al., 1993).

98 All OUs from a single lake were sampled within a maximum of 21 days. Diatom counts had  
99 to include at least 350 cells per slide, with more than 50% of the diatom cells determined at  
100 the species level, to comply with the NF T90-354 requirements.

#### 101 2-1-2 Physico-chemical data

102 Parameter values were determined in summer at the deepest point of each lake, according to  
103 European standards. Data were obtained from national surveillance monitoring programs.  
104 Water quality analysis was not systematically performed each year: in a few cases, the most  
105 recent physicochemical data available were collected three years before the diatom samples.  
106 The following parameters were recorded: biological oxygen demand (BOD<sub>5</sub>, mg.l<sup>-1</sup>), oxygen  
107 (O<sub>2</sub>, mg.l<sup>-1</sup>), oxygen saturation (% O<sub>2</sub>), conductivity (Cond, µs.cm<sup>2</sup>), Kjeldahl nitrogen (NKJ,

108 mg.l<sup>-1</sup>), ammonium (NH<sub>4</sub>, mg.l<sup>-1</sup>), nitrates (NO<sub>3</sub>, mg.l<sup>-1</sup>), nitrites (NO<sub>2</sub>, mg.l<sup>-1</sup>), orthophosphates  
109 (PO<sub>4</sub>, mg.l<sup>-1</sup>), total phosphorous (Pt, mg.l<sup>-1</sup>) and suspended particles (SP, mg.l<sup>-1</sup>).

## 110 **2-2 Data analysis and index settlement**

111 All analyses were performed with R version 4.1.2 (2021-11-01) (R Core Team, 2021)  
112 (Platform: x86\_64-pc-linux-gnu (64-bit), Running under: Ubuntu 22.04.1 LTS).

113 Considering that the final dataset revealed a discontinuous trophic gradient, we opted for the  
114 so-called “Threshold Indicator Taxa ANalysis” method (TITAN2 package, Baker et al.,  
115 2020), which, based on bootstrapping and permutations, makes it possible to determine a list  
116 of “alert taxa”. The presence and/or increasing abundance of alert taxa reveal the existence of  
117 anthropogenic pressures. TITAN replaces the community-level response along a composite  
118 gradient with taxon-specific responses towards single environmental variables (Dufrière and  
119 Legendre 1997). Negative and positive responses are distinguished, and cumulative  
120 decreasing or increasing responses in the community are tracked. This method is particularly  
121 suitable for setting up multimetric indices.

122 A three-step procedure was necessary to build our Biological Diatom Index for Lakes (IBDL):  
123 identification of alert taxa, choice of relevant metrics, and aggregation of these metrics to  
124 obtain the final index score.

### 125 **2-2-1 Identification of alert taxa**

126 For the next part of the analysis, we set an occurrence threshold  $\geq 3$  for taxa to be included in  
127 the index calculation (the so-called “index taxa”).

128 TITAN combines change-point analysis (nCPA; King and Richardson 2003) and indicator  
129 species analysis (IndVal, Dufrière and Legendre 1997). Basically, the change-point analysis  
130 compares within-group vs. between-group dissimilarity to detect shifts in community

131 structure along the environmental variable considered (for further details concerning this  
132 method see Baker and King, 2010). Indicator species analysis then identifies the strength of  
133 association between any particular taxon and this sample grouping. At the end of the process,  
134 two IndVal scores are calculated for a single taxon in a two-group classification. The  
135 algorithm finally classifies taxa into three different categories:  $Z^+$  taxa, showing a significant  
136 increase in abundance along the increasing environmental gradient;  $Z^-$  taxa, showing a  
137 significant decrease along this gradient; and indifferent taxa, with no significant trend.  
138 Alert taxa were defined as  $Z^+$  or  $Z^-$  taxa whose shift thresholds were greater or lesser than the  
139 community shift threshold.

#### 140 2-2-2 Building metrics and selecting the relevant ones

141 For each environmental variable, a metric was calculated at the OU scale according to (1):

$$142 \text{ Metric}_M = 1 - \left( \frac{\text{Alert}_{\text{taxa}}}{\text{Index}_{\text{taxa}}} \right) \quad (1)$$

143 Where:

144  $\text{Alert}_{\text{taxa}}$  is the number of alert taxa and  $\text{Index}_{\text{taxa}}$  is the number of index taxa in the sample.

145 The metric value is bounded between 0 and 1. The lowest value (0) corresponds to a species  
146 list entirely composed of alert taxa (determined for the environmental variable considered).

147 To build our index, we then selected the most relevant metrics, i.e., those with the best  
148 relationship with the environmental parameter considered. We used Pearson's correlation  
149 coefficients to measure this statistical association and only kept metrics showing a Pearson's  
150 coefficient over 0.6. Metrics should significantly increase with impairment, significantly  
151 decrease with impairment, or show no particular pattern. We obtained the response patterns of  
152 the different metrics by transforming raw values into normalized deviations (Standardized  
153 Effect Size: SES, Gotelli and McCabe, 2002; Mondy et al., 2012) (2). SES values made it



154 possible to obtain a single response pattern for a metric whatever the lake metatype and  
155 substrate type considered.

$$156 \quad SES_M = \left( \frac{Metric_M - M_{group}}{sd_{group}} \right) \quad (2)$$

157 Where:

158  $Metric_M$  is the observed value of the metric,  $M_{group}$  and  $sd_{group}$  are the mean and standard  
159 deviation, respectively, of the metric value for a given group of samples (i.e., substrate type x  
160 lake alkalinity metatype) (values of  $M_{group}$  and  $sd_{group}$  are given in Table 1 S1)

161 The next step consisted of the normalization of SES values ( $SES_{nor_M}$ ) to make comparable  
162 metric variation ranges (3):

$$163 \quad SES_{nor_M} = \frac{(SES_M - Min)}{(Max - Min)} \quad (3)$$

164 Where:

165  $SES_M$  is the observed value of SES for a given metric, Min its minimum value and Max its  
166 maximum value in the whole dataset (values of Min and Max are given in Table 2 S1).

167 We further transformed metric values from normalized SES into the Ecological Quality Ratio  
168 (EQR) (4), i.e. the ratio between the observed value of a metric ( $SES_{nor_M}$ ) and its expected  
169 value under reference conditions (Kelly et al., 2014a), for any lake metatype and any substrate  
170 ( $SES_{nor_{Mref}}$ , values given in Table 3 S1).

$$171 \quad EQR = \left( \frac{SES_{nor_M}}{SES_{nor_{Mref}}} \right) \quad (4)$$

172

173 Finally, for each metric, we performed a Wilcoxon test to detect the potential influence of  
174 substrate type on the EQR values obtained at the OU scale.

175 2-2-4 Aggregating metric values to obtain the final IBDL score

176 The final index score was obtained at the OU scale by averaging the selected metric values,  
177 expressed in EQR.

178 For a score calculated for both mineral and macrophyte substrates, the lowest value was  
179 considered the final score.

180 Each OU belongs to one of the four riparian zone types, as required in the NF T90-328  
181 standard (AFNOR, 2022). These types were defined from the vegetation composition and/or  
182 anthropogenic alterations of the lakeshore. The percentage of each riparian zone type was  
183 estimated *in situ*, on the whole lake perimeter, during the sampling surveys. The final index  
184 score for the whole lake was derived from a weighted average of the  $Score_{OU}$  (5), taking into  
185 account the percentage of the lake perimeter each OU represented in terms of riparian zone  
186 type ( $P_{C_{type}}$ ).

$$187 \quad IBDL = \sum_{type=1}^4 (\overline{Score_{OU}} * P_{C_{type}}) \quad (5)$$

188 Finally, the resulting IBDL scores varied between 0 (worst water quality) and 1. Relationships  
189 between IBDL scores and the different environmental variables considered were tested *a*  
190 *posteriori* with simple linear regressions (R "mass" package, Venables & Ripley, 2002).

191

## 192 2-3 Comparing IBDL and IBML scores

193 We compared IBDL and IBML scores, based respectively on diatom and macrophyte  
194 communities, to evaluate their complementarity or redundancy. IBML scores were computed  
195 with the online application <https://see.eaufrance.fr/api/indicateurs/IBML/1.0.1> and the "httr"  
196 package (Wickham, 2022).

197 We built a multiple linear regression model ("mass" package) to test which index correlated  
198 best with Pt values: IBML, IBDL or a combination of both (mean value).

199

## 200 2-4 Preparing intercalibration

201 Considering a future intercalibration exercise, we analyzed the relationships between IBDL  
202 scores and  $P_t$  for each lake metatype. A good correlation of the candidate metric with  $P_t$   
203 constitutes a key criterion for considering the index ready for integration into the  
204 intercalibration process (Kelly et al., 2014b).

205 We also plotted IBDL against CM scores (intercalibration Common Metric, i.e., the Trophic  
206 Index developed by Rott et al., 1998), to check their compliance. The CM was calculated with  
207 Omnidia 6 software.

208

## 209 3-Results

210 Our data revealed discontinuous pressure gradients (Table 1), with a clear lack of impacted  
211 conditions and an over-representation of lakes characterized by low eutrophication levels.

Variable	% of missing values	mean	sd	median	p25	p75	maximum
ammonium (NH <sub>4</sub> , mg.l-1)	0.292	0.090	0.350	0.015	0.010	0.060	3.30
biological oxygen demand (DBO <sub>5</sub> , mg.l-1)	0.584	2.157	2.615	1.300	0.900	1.800	12.00
conductivity	0.309	230.108	124.368	243.500	158.000	297.000	815.00
Kjeldahl nitrogen (NKJ, mg.l-1)	0.292	0.661	0.959	0.250	0.250	0.700	6.90
nitrates (NO <sub>3</sub> , mg.l-1)	0.292	1.113	1.222	0.600	0.250	1.400	6.07
nitrites (NO <sub>2</sub> , mg.l-1)	0.292	0.011	0.025	0.005	0.005	0.010	0.30
orthophosphates (PO <sub>4</sub> , mg.l-1)	0.292	0.015	0.026	0.005	0.005	0.010	0.22
oxygen (O <sub>2</sub> , mg.l-1)	0.333	9.143	3.943	8.700	8.100	9.685	73.00
oxygen saturation (% O <sub>2</sub> )	0.333	110.203	20.910	108.000	101.000	117.650	187.00
suspended particles (SP, mg.l-1)	0.292	7.979	18.145	2.800	1.600	5.000	153.00
total phosphorous (Pt, mg.l-1)	0.292	0.027	0.067	0.005	0.005	0.015	0.51

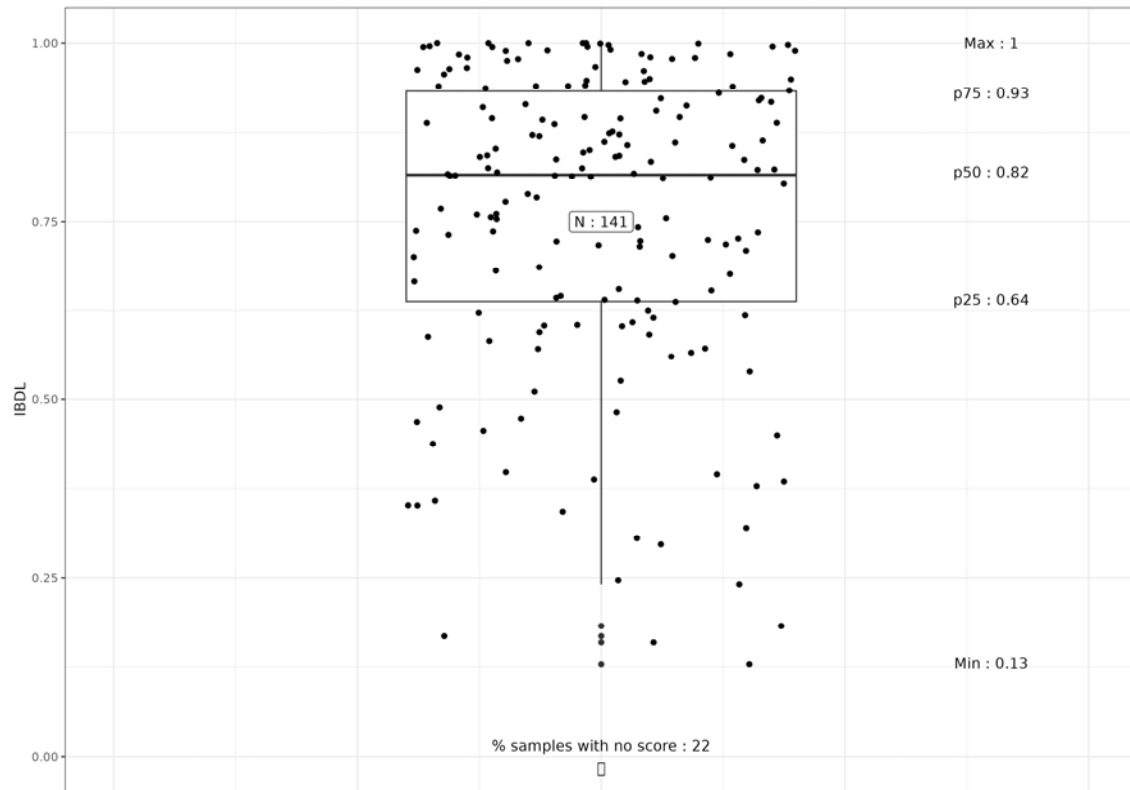
212 Table 1. Physico-chemical data available for analysis. sd: standard deviation, p25: 25<sup>th</sup>  
213 percentile; p75: 75<sup>th</sup> percentile  
214

215 Biotic and abiotic data were obtained for 958 samples. Considering the data validation  
216 criteria, 99% of the samples were included in the analysis. Data from both substrate types  
217 were available for 552 OUs. Seven hundred eighty taxa were recorded, 8% of which were  
218 identified to the genus level. One hundred and twenty-one alert taxa were determined out of  
219 590 index taxa (S2).

220 We obtained the following Pearson test values for the different metrics at the OU scale: R = -  
221 0.715 for the metric based on the parameter NKJ, R = -0.754 for BOD<sub>5</sub>, R = -0.688 for Pt, R = -  
222 -0.666 for SP, R = -0.553 for PO<sub>4</sub>, R = -0.329 for Conductivity, R = -0.174 for O<sub>2</sub>, R = -0.265  
223 for NO<sub>2</sub>, and R = -0.204 for %O<sub>2</sub>. Considering the selection rule proposed ( $|R| > 0.6$ ), only the  
224 metrics based on NKJ, BOD<sub>5</sub>, Pt and SP were considered to build the IBDL.

225 Metric values (in EQR) calculated from the lists of taxa sampled on mineral substrates and  
226 macrophytes for a single OU did not differ significantly (p-value = 0.65).

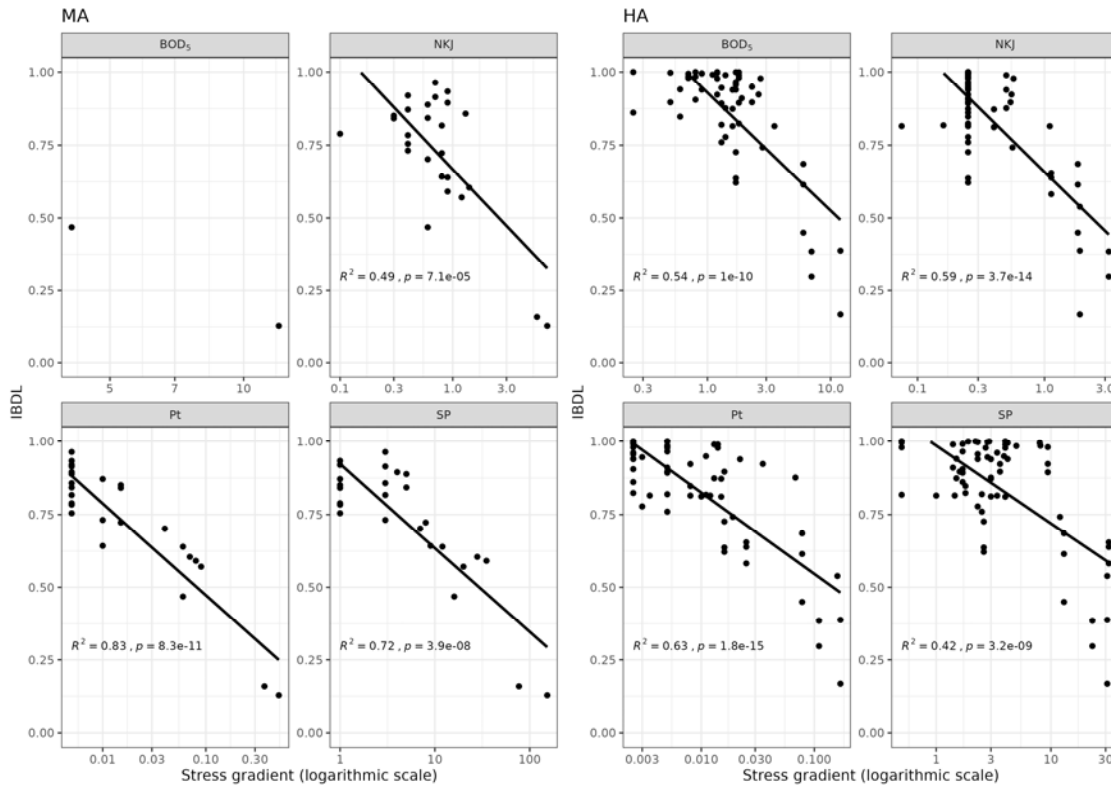
227 IBDL scores at the lake level were calculated from the selected metrics following the  
228 aggregation rules proposed. The scores obtained were distributed as given in Figure 2. IBDL  
229 could not be calculated for 20% of the samples due to incomplete floristic data.



230

231 Figure 2: Distribution of the IBDL scores obtained (p25: 25<sup>th</sup> percentile; p50: median value;  
232 p75: 75<sup>th</sup> percentile).

233 The relationships between IBDL scores and the different environmental variables considered  
234 were very good (Figure 3) in both high-alkalinity and medium-alkalinity lakes. IBDL scores  
235 showed high correlations with these variables, particularly Pt, in both high alkalinity ( $R^2 =$   
236  $0.63$ ,  $p = 1.8e^{-15}$ ) and medium alkalinity lakes ( $R^2 = 0.83$ ,  $p = 8.3e^{-11}$ ). Note that data from low  
237 alkalinity lakes were too scarce to perform such correlations.

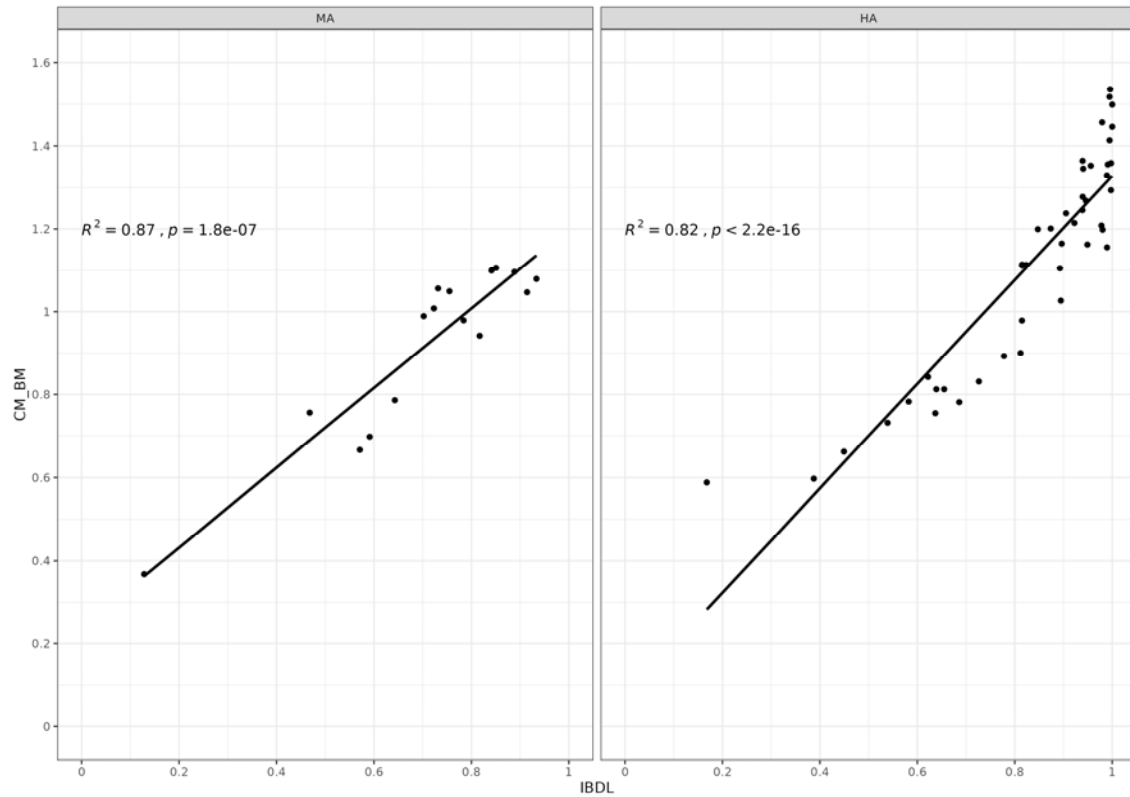


238

239 Figure 3. Relationships between IBDL and the environmental variables considered (MA:  
240 medium-alkalinity lakes; HA: high-alkalinity lakes; BOD<sub>5</sub>: biological oxygen demand; NKJ:  
241 Kjeldahl nitrogen; Pt: total phosphorous; SP: suspended particles.

242

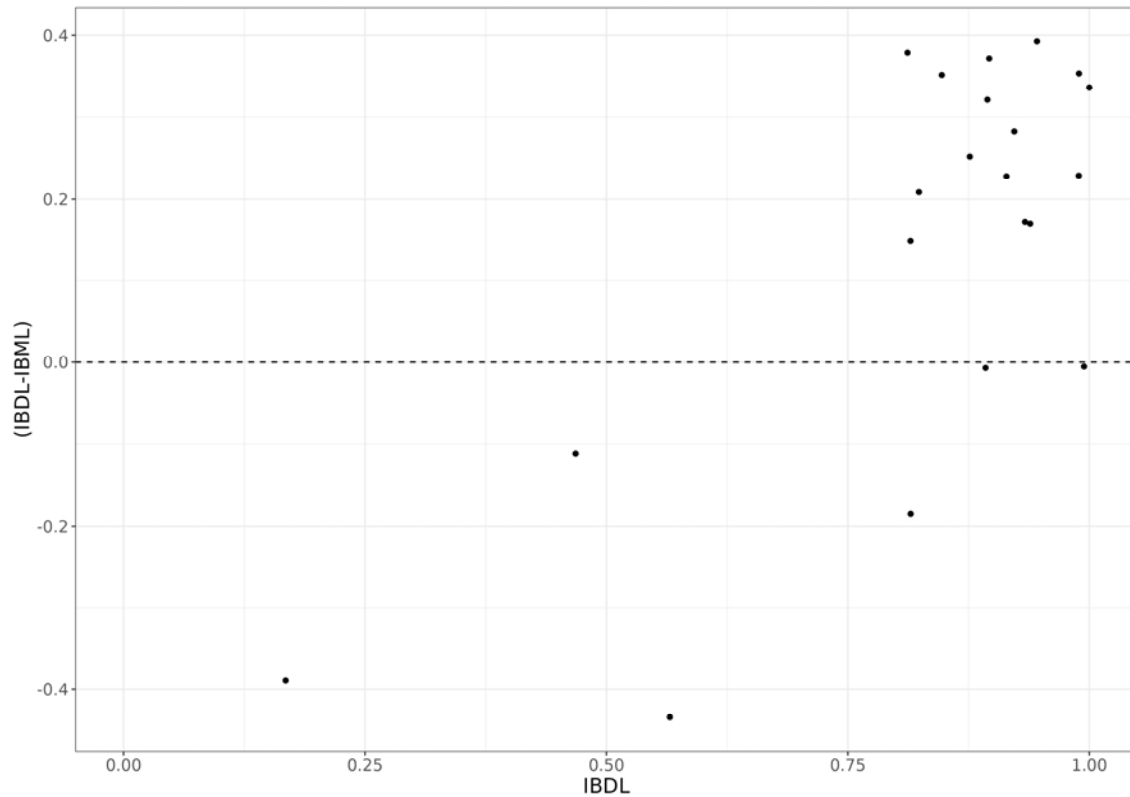
243 IBDL scores were also strongly associated with CM scores ( $R^2 = 0.52$  and  $p = 2.2e^{-16}$  for  
244 high-alkalinity lakes;  $R^2 = 0.87$  and  $p = 1.8 e^{-7}$  for medium-alkalinity lakes) (Figure 4).



245

246 Figure 4: Relationships between IBDL and the common metric (CM) in medium alkalinity  
247 (MA) and high alkalinity (HA) lakes.

248 IBDL scores showed a better correlation with Pt (AIC = -171.44) than did IBML (AIC = -  
249 129.25) or a combination of both indices (AIC = -169.44). Nevertheless, IBDL tended to be  
250 generally less stringent than IBML (in 18 out of 22 samples), especially for scores higher than  
251 0.8 (clearly dominant here). Figure 5 presents the difference between IBDL and IBML scores  
252 according to IBDL scores.



253

254 Figure 5: Difference between IBDL and IBML scores according to IBDL scores

255

## 256 4-Discussion

257 As required by the WFD, we developed a diatom index for the assessment of the ecological  
258 status of French lakes. We obtained very good correlations between IBDL and key  
259 environmental variables. One major challenge arose from the discontinuous pressure gradient  
260 of our dataset, especially the low available number of nutrient-impacted lakes.

261 The scarcity of impacted lakes in the datasets used to build diatom indices is not rare and has  
262 already been pointed out by some authors (Bennion et al., 2014). This lack makes it  
263 impossible to capture the entire trophic gradient or to build reliable species' ecological  
264 profiles. However, the majority of existing indices are calculated as an abundance-weighted  
265 average of the ecological profiles of every taxon from a sample, according to the Zelinka &



266 Marvan formula (Zelinka and Marvan, 1961). This method is far from optimal for datasets  
267 showing discontinuous or very specific environmental conditions (Carayon et al., 2020). In  
268 such cases, the identification of alert taxa seems more appropriate than considering diatom  
269 communities as a whole. This has made the TITAN algorithm increasingly popular for  
270 detecting specific taxa providing reliable signals of a specific stress (Khamis et al., 2014;  
271 Costas et al., 2018; Gieswein et al., 2019; Carayon et al., 2020; Gonzalez-Paz et al., 2020).  
272 Using this method, we built a multimetric index based on different pressure gradients (NKJ,  
273 SP, BOD<sub>5</sub> and P<sub>i</sub>). Although the strong influence of nutrients and organic matter on diatom  
274 community composition is well established (Jüttner, 2010; Stevenson et al., 2013), diatom-  
275 based metrics rarely take into account suspended particles for water quality assessment (but  
276 see Larras et al., 2017). Diatoms are indeed directly impaired by turbidity, reducing light  
277 availability for photosynthesis. Multimetric indices thus offer simple tools to summarize the  
278 effect of multi-pressure gradients on communities (Riato et al., 2018), and can be considered  
279 more effective for assessing biological conditions than a single metric (Stevenson et al.,  
280 2013). However, despite their increasing use, multimetric indices suffer from the subjectivity  
281 that can arise from metric selection (Reavie et al., 2008). Here, we attempted to avoid this  
282 pitfall by proposing a method of selecting metrics based on the robustness of their response to  
283 environmental gradients.

284 IBDL appears less stringent than IBML when assessing lakes' ecological status.  
285 Literature comparing results from different indices in lakes, though scarce, tends to agree with  
286 this overestimation of water quality by diatom-based methods (Kolada et al., 2016).  
287 Phytobenthos has long been paid less attention than macrophytes for the assessment of lake  
288 ecological status. It is true that recent diatom-based metrics barely detected newly impacted  
289 lakes that would not have been detected by macrophyte metrics. Bennion et al. (2014)  
290 showed, for example, that their index (LTDI) performed well for lakes with good ecological

291 status, but diatoms and other methods agreed less for lakes of lower status. This was  
292 particularly the case in the presence of morphological alterations, for which diatoms are poor  
293 indicators. A possible general explanation for the lower stringency of diatom-based indices in  
294 lakes is the high abundance of species complexes like *Achnantheidium minutissimum* or  
295 *Gomphonema parvulum*. Such complexes merge taxa that are morphologically close but with  
296 different ecological preferences. Due to the existence of different taxa within the *A.*  
297 *minutissimum* complex, many authors consider it an indicator of good water quality (Almeida  
298 et al., 2014), whereas others consider it as tolerant towards toxic contaminants  
299 (micropollutants) and hydrologic disturbances (Cantonati et al., 2014; Lainé et al., 2014).  
300 Considering the generally high abundance of *A. minutissimum* in samples, this tends to blur  
301 the overall pressure-response relationship between index scores and environmental variables  
302 (Potapova and Hamilton, 2007). TITAN provides a means to avoid this pitfall, as such  
303 complexes are not selected as alert taxa, given that their abundance dynamics do not show  
304 clear response patterns to environmental gradients. Indeed, *A. minutissimum*, although highly  
305 abundant in our dataset (22% of total species abundances), was not considered an alert taxon.  
306 The fact remains that IBDL tends to be less stringent than IBML, despite better relationships  
307 with Pt. In consequence, we have to explain why we think that the use of diatom-based  
308 indices to assess lake ecological status is justified.

309 First, the discrepancy between macrophyte and diatom responses relies mainly on the  
310 differences between their integration periods, given that indices provide information on  
311 ecological conditions over the time an assemblage develops. Lavoie (2009) showed the  
312 integration period of diatom-based indices to be about 2–5 weeks for nutrients, whereas  
313 macrophytes react on yearly time scales (Kelly et al., 2016). As diatoms catch nutrients  
314 directly from the water column (Wetzel, 2001), they also may be more directly sensitive to  
315 rapid changes in trophic status than macrophytes (Vermaat et al., 2022). The rapid response of

316 phytobenthos should justify its routine use (Schneider et al., 2019), in particular for lakes in  
317 non-equilibrium states (Kelly et al., 2016).

318 Second, diatom-based indices are essential where hydrologic pressures in littoral areas  
319 prevent the development of macrophytes, and in lake typologies where macrophyte  
320 communities are naturally species-poor or even absent (Schneider et al., 2019). Thus, while  
321 macrophyte-based indices cannot be calculated in all lakes, this is not true for diatom-based  
322 indices. Moreover, our results show that, with IBDL, water quality managers can directly  
323 compare ecological status assessments from different lakes even if the substrate sampled is  
324 different. Many studies highlighted that allelopathic relationships between macrophytes and  
325 epiphytic diatoms may be responsible for specific associations between macrophytes and  
326 diatom species and, thus, may contribute to the organization of particular assembly patterns  
327 (Hinojosa-Garro et al., 2010). In any case, in terms of ecological preferences, and  
328 consequently in terms of IBDL scores, our results did not show any significant differences  
329 between communities sampled on mineral substrates or macrophytes at the OU level,  
330 corroborating previous results obtained by Kitner and Poulíčková (2003) and Bennion et al.  
331 (2014). Other studies even support the use of epiphytic diatoms as biological indicators for  
332 lakes irrespective of the dominant macrophyte species sampled (Cejudo-Figueiras et al.,  
333 2010). The key point is to avoid senescent material or recently grown shoots that would  
334 potentially induce a colonization stage effect (King et al., 2006).

335         The next challenge was to check the consistency of the resulting classification of lakes  
336 based on IBDL to the harmonized definition of good ecological status established in the  
337 completed intercalibration exercise (Kelly et al., 2014b). The first step consisted in testing the  
338 correlation between IBDL scores and total phosphorus in our dataset. Only HA and MA  
339 typologies were considered here but, in any case, the last intercalibration exercise could not  
340 be performed for LA lakes. We obtained very good correlations that are clearly an

341 improvement compared to the non-significant relationship previously obtained between BDI  
342 (diatom index used for the assessment of rivers) and Pt, and even better than the pressure-  
343 impact relationships observed at a pan-European scale ( $R^2$  between national methods and Pt  
344 ranged from 0.32 to 0.66 max., Kelly et al., 2014b). The second step consisted in testing the  
345 correlation between IBDL scores and the intercalibration common metric (CM) scores, in  
346 EQR. Here, the correlations demonstrated a very good agreement between IBDL and CM  
347 scores in both medium ( $R^2 = 0.87$ ) and high alkalinity ( $R^2 = 0.82$ ) lakes. We are, therefore,  
348 confident in our ability to match IBDL ecological status thresholds with those validated at the  
349 European level.

## 350 **Conclusion**

351 The new diatom index proposed here meets the requirements of the WFD and makes it  
352 possible to assess lakes' ecological status in metropolitan France. The IBDL has proved to be  
353 particularly relevant as it has a twofold interest: an excellent relationship with total  
354 phosphorus and an application in any lake metatype. Its complementarity with IBML justifies  
355 the use of at least two primary producer components for ecological status classification (Kelly  
356 et al., 2016).

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## 361 **Author's contributions**

362 All authors participated in designing the study and developing aims and research questions.  
363 S.B. designed methodology, extracted data and made the analyses, supported by T.L.

364 concerning pretreatments before intercalibration. J.T.R. led the writing of the manuscript  
365 supported by S.B., S.M. and V.B. All authors contributed critically to the drafts, contributed  
366 to the final version of the manuscript, and gave final approval for publication.

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